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The Thermidorian Reaction and the Directory 1794–9

POINTS TO CONSIDER

Following the overthrow of Robespierre and the end of the Terror a reaction took place among those opposed to revolutionary government. A new system was created – the Directory – which, although the longest lasting of the regimes created during the Revolution, was also in the end replaced. This period is examined as three themes:

- The Thermidorian reaction
- The Directory
- The *Coup* of Brumaire and the overthrow of the Directory

Key dates

1794	August 1	Law of 22 Prairial repealed, government reorganised
	September 18	State ends financial support of the Church
	November 12	Jacobin Club closed
1795	February 21	Formal separation of Church and State
	April 1–2	Germinal Uprising
	May 20–23	Prairial Uprising
	August 22	Constitution of Year III
	October 1	Vendémiaire Uprising, Bonaparte appointed commander of the Army of the Interior
	November 2	Directory established
1796	March 11	Bonaparte appointed to command the army in Italy
1797	September 4	<i>Coup d'état</i> of Fructidor
1798	May 11	Law of 22 Floréal
1799	June 18	<i>Coup d'état</i> of Prairial
	November 9–10	<i>Coup d'état</i> of Brumaire, Bonaparte overthrows the Directory
	December 25	Constitution of Year VIII

Key question
Who were the
Thermidorians?

1 | The Thermidorian Reaction

There was a great popular outburst of delight and relief when Robespierre was executed. The journalist Charles de Lacretelle reported the reactions in Paris: 'People were hugging each other in the streets and at places of entertainment and they were so surprised to find themselves still alive that their joy almost turned to frenzy'.

Key terms

Thermidorians

Those individuals and groups who had helped overthrow Robespierre.

Regicides

Those involved in the trial and execution of Louis XVI.

Those who helped to overthrow Robespierre were known as the **Thermidorians** (after the month of Thermidor when the *coup* occurred). The Thermidorians were a mixed group – members of the two great Committees (the CPS and the CGS), ex-terrorists and deputies of the Plain. The Plain now emerged from obscurity to take control. They were the men who had gained from the Revolution by buying *biens nationaux* (land) or by obtaining government contracts. As **regicides** these men were firmly attached to the Republic and did not want to see the return of a monarchy, even a constitutional one. They also disliked the Jacobins, who had given too much power to the *sans-culottes* and had interfered with a free market through the Maximum laws. For them popular democracy, anarchy and the Terror were synonymous. These men were joined by many Montagnards who had rejected their former views and values.

Key question
What measures were
taken to end the
Terror?

Ending the Terror

The Convention now set about dismantling the machinery of the Terror. With this aim, between the end of July 1794 and 31 May 1795, the Convention:

- abolished the Revolutionary Tribunal, following the execution of a further 63 people, including some who had been leading terrorists
- released all suspects from prison
- repealed the law of Prairial (see page 125) and closed the Jacobin Club.

The deputies were determined to gain control of the institutions that had made the Terror possible. This meant abandoning the centralisation established by the CPS. The Convention decreed that 25 per cent of the members of the two Committees (the CPS and the CGS) had to be changed each month. In August, 16 committees of the Convention were set up to take over most of the work of the CGS and CPS. The latter was now confined to running the war and diplomacy. In Paris the Commune was abolished. In local government power passed again to the moderates and property owners, who had been in control before June 1793.

The Thermidorians also decided to deal with religious issues by renouncing the Constitutional Church. In September 1794 the Convention decided that it would no longer pay clerical salaries. This brought about for the first time the **separation of Church and State**. On 21 February 1795 the government restored freedom of worship for all religions, and thereby formally ended

Key term

Separation of Church and State

The Republic was legally committed to religious neutrality. In order to serve their parishioners, priests were required to follow French law as opposed to Church law.

the persecution of religions waged during the Terror by the de-christianisation campaign. State recognition of the Cult of the Supreme Being was also ended. For the first time in a major European country the State was declaring itself to be entirely neutral in all matters of religious faith – in that it would not favour one belief to the exclusion of others. The consequence of this was that refractory and constitutional priests, protestants and Jews would be in free competition for popular support.

The Risings of Germinal and Prairial

The Thermidorians wanted to get rid of price controls, partly because of their support for a **free market** and partly because it was considered to be unenforceable. These were abolished in December 1794. Public arms workshops were closed or restored to private ownership. The removal of price controls led to a fall in the value of the *assignat* and massive inflation. The government now had to buy its war materials at market prices. It therefore decided to print more *assignats* to pay for them. In August 1794, before the Maximum was abolished, the *assignat* was 34 per cent of its 1790 value. It dropped to 8 per cent in April 1795 and 4 per cent in May. The situation was made worse by a poor harvest in 1794. Grain shortages led to a huge increase in the price of bread.

The winter of 1794–5 was an unprecedentedly severe one. Rivers froze and factories closed down. A combination of economic collapse and the bitter cold produced an enormous increase in misery, suicides and death from malnutrition, as scarcity turned into famine. A publisher, Ruault, described the situation: 'The flour intended for Paris is stopped on the way and stolen by citizens even hungrier no doubt than ourselves, if such there be within the whole Republic. Yet there is no lack of corn anywhere! ... The farmers absolutely refused to sell it for paper money'.

Germinal

The hungry turned their fury against the Convention. **Germinal** (1 April 1795) was a demonstration rather than a rising. A large crowd of about 10,000 unarmed people marched on the Convention. Many gained access to the main hall and disrupted debates with demands for bread, the Constitution of 1793 and the release of former members of the CPS – Barère, Collot and Billaud, who had been imprisoned following the *Coup* of Thermidor. The demonstrators expected support from the Montagnards in the Assembly but received none. When loyal National Guards appeared, the insurgents withdrew without resisting.

The repression that followed Germinal was light. But to emphasise its authority the Convention sentenced Barère, Collot and Billaud to be deported to Devil's Island in the French colony of Guiana, off the coast of South America. To safeguard security, other known activists during the Terror were disarmed. During the spring of 1795, disillusionment with the Convention's inability to resolve the famine led to sporadic outbreaks of violence in the provinces, some of which were organised by royalists.

The government restored freedom of worship for all religions. Protestants had been granted religious toleration in 1787, while Jews were given citizenship in 1790: 21 February 1795

Key date

Key question

What was the impact of the economic crisis?

Free market

A trading system with no artificial price controls. Prices are determined solely by supply and demand.

Germinal

Popular demonstration on 1 April 1795 in Paris. Named after a month in the new revolutionary calendar.

Key terms

Key question
What was the significance of the Prairial uprising?

Key term
Prairial
A large popular uprising in Paris on 20–1 May 1795. It was named after a month in the new revolutionary calendar.

Prairial

Prairial was a much more serious affair. It was an armed rising like those of 10 August 1792 and 2 June 1793 (see pages 87 and 108). On 1 Prairial (20 May 1795) a large crowd of housewives, workers and some National Guard units marched on the Convention to demand bread. In the ensuing chaos a deputy was killed and the mood of the crowd became increasingly hostile. The following day forces loyal to the Convention gathered to confront the crowd and a tense situation developed. The Convention's gunners went over to the rebels and aimed their cannon at the Assembly, but no-one was prepared to fire. The crisis was resolved when the Convention agreed to accept a petition from the insurgents and to set up a Food Commission. In the evening loyal National Guards arrived and cleared the Assembly.

On 3 Prairial (22 May) the Convention took the offensive. The rebel suburbs were surrounded by 20,000 troops of the regular army who forced them to give up their arms and cannon. This time the repression was severe:

- 40 Montagnards were arrested and six were executed
- a military commission condemned to death a further 36, including the gunners who had joined the rebels
- about 6000 militants were disarmed and arrested.

Prairial marked the end of the *sans-culottes* as a political and military force. The significance of Prairial was that the defeat of popular movement marked the end of the radical phase of the Revolution. No longer would the *sans-culottes* be able to threaten and intimidate an elected assembly. In Year IV (1795–6) conditions were just about as bad as in Year III (1794–5), yet there was no rising. Demoralised, without arms and without leaders, the *sans-culottes* were a spent force.

There were a number of reasons why the uprising of Prairial failed:

- the workers of Paris were divided – the National Guard units in several Sections of the city remained loyal to the Convention
- there was no institution like the Paris Commune in 1792 to co-ordinate their activities
- they were politically inexperienced. When they had the advantage and had surrounded the Convention they allowed the opportunity to slip
- loss of support from the radical bourgeoisie, which they had enjoyed between 1789 and 1793.

The key factor, however, was the role of the army. The regular army was used against the citizens of Paris for the first time since the Réveillon riots in the spring of 1789 (see page 34). Its intervention was decisive and made clear just how dependent the new regime was on the military. This would prove to be the first of many instances when the army would interfere in France's internal politics.

The White Terror

The 'White Terror' was an attack on ex-terrorists and all who had done well out of the Revolution by those who had suffered under it. White was the colour of the Bourbons, so 'White Terror' implies that it was a royalist reaction. This was true in part, as returned *émigrés* and non-juring priests did take advantage of the anti-Jacobin revulsion at the persecution of the Year II. In Nîmes 'Companies of the Sun' were formed by royalists to attack former terrorists.

However, most of those who took part in the White Terror were not royalists and had no intention of restoring the Bourbons and the *seigneurs* of the *ancien régime*. Their main concern was vengeance on all those who had been members of the popular societies and watch committees. The Whites were people who had been victims of the Revolutionary Tribunals. They now turned on those who had done well out of the Revolution, such as purchasers of state land, constitutional priests and government officials.

The White Terror in Paris

The White Terror did not cover the whole of France. It was confined to a score of departments north and west of the Loire and south of Lyon. In Paris it was limited to the activities of the *jeunesse dorée*, who played an essential role in organising and co-ordinating the reactionary movement. These were middle-class youths – bankers' and lawyers' clerks, actors, musicians, army deserters and sons of suspects or of those executed. They dressed extravagantly with square collars, earrings and long hair tied back at the neck, like those about to be guillotined. They formed gangs to beat up and intimidate Jacobins and *sans-culottes*. Yet, although there was certainly some violence, it was not on the same scale as the Terror.

White Terror in the Vendée

Much more violent was the White Terror in the north-west and south-east of France. Guerrilla warfare was revived in the Vendée in 1794 after the brutal repression of Year II. In the spring, a movement known as **Chouan**, opposed to conscription, began in Brittany under the leadership of Jean Cottureau. Groups of between 50 and 100 men posed a serious threat to law and order as they roamed the countryside, attacking grain convoys and destabilising local government outside the towns by murdering officials.

From the summer of 1794 to the spring of 1796 they controlled most of Brittany and, under royalist leaders, sought English support. In June 1795, 3000 *émigré* troops based in the Channel Islands were landed at Quiberon Bay and were joined by thousands of Chouans. The total rebel force possibly numbered 22,000.

General Hoche, forewarned, sealed them off with 10,000 troops and compelled them to surrender. Six thousand prisoners were

Key question
What was the motivation behind the White Terror?

Jeunesse dorée (gilded youth)
Young men who dressed extravagantly as a reaction to the restrictions of the Terror. They were also known as muscadins.

Chouan
Guerrilla groups operating in the Vendée between 1794 and 1796.

Key terms

Key date

taken, including over 1000 *émigrés*: 640 were shot, along with 108 Chouans in the biggest disaster suffered by *émigré* forces. The government decided that the Chouan had to be eradicated, and sent Hoche with a huge army of 140,000 to wipe out the Chouan and Vendée rebels. Highly mobile flying columns of soldiers swept across the area north and south of the Loire and by the summer of 1796 they had restored government authority once again to this part of France.

White Terror in the south

In the south the murder gangs of the White Terror were not considered to be a serious threat to the Republic, so little effort was made to crush them. This allowed them to become established and to spread rapidly after the disarming of former terrorists and their supporters. Where the Terror had been at its most savage in Lyon and the Rhône valley, prison massacres reminiscent of the September Massacres in 1792 took place. Gangs of youths, like the *jeunesse dorée* in Paris, killed as many as 2000 in the south-east in 1795. The killing continued throughout 1796 and for much of the following year.

Key question

What did the Thermidorians hope to achieve in a new constitution?

Key date

Constitution of Year III agreed which established the Directory: 22 August 1795

The Constitution of the Year III 1795

The Thermidorians wanted a new constitution, which would guarantee the main features of the Revolution of 1789 – the abolition of privilege, freedom of the individual and the control of local and national affairs by an elected assembly and elected officials. They also wanted to ensure that a dictatorship, like that of the CPS, would be impossible in the future and that there would be no return to monarchy or to popular sovereignty on the *sans-culotte* model.

The main features of the new constitution were:

- All males over 21 who paid direct taxation were allowed to vote in the primary assemblies to choose electors.
- Real power, however, was exercised by the electors who actually chose the deputies. Electors had to pay taxes equivalent to 150–200 days' labour. This was so high that the number of electors had fallen from 50,000 in 1790–2 to 30,000 in 1795. Electors were, therefore, the very rich, who had suffered from the Revolution in 1793–4.
- In order to prevent a dictatorship arising, the Thermidorians rigidly separated the legislature from the executive.

The legislature

The legislature was divided into two chambers:

1. The Council of Five Hundred, all of whom had to be over the age of 30. This Council would initiate legislation and then would pass it on to a Council of Ancients
2. The Council of Ancients – 250 men over 40, who would approve or object to bills but could not introduce or change them. There was no property qualification for the councillors of either chamber.

Elections were to be held every year, when a third of the members retired.

The Executive

The Executive was to be a Directory of five, chosen by the Ancients from a list drawn up by the Five Hundred. The five Directors would hold office for five years, though one, chosen by lot, had to retire each year. Directors were not allowed to be members of either Council, and their powers were limited. They could not initiate or veto laws or declare war and they had no control over the treasury. Yet they had considerable authority, as they were in charge of diplomacy, military affairs and law enforcement. Ministers (who also could not sit in the Councils) were appointed by, and were responsible to, the Directors, as were government commissioners, who replaced the representatives-on-mission and national agents and saw that government policy was implemented in the provinces.

Weaknesses in the new Constitution

In spite of the complex system of **checks and balances** designed to prevent a dictatorship, the new Constitution had many weaknesses:

- The yearly elections promoted instability, as majorities in the Councils could be quickly overturned.
- There was no means of resolving conflicts between the legislature and the executive.
- The Councils could paralyse the Directory by refusing to pass laws that the government required.
- The Directors could neither dissolve the Councils nor veto laws passed by them.
- The legislature was not in a strong position either, if it clashed with the executive. It could alter the composition of the Directory only by replacing the one director who retired each year with its own candidate.

The new Constitution enforced quite rigidly the **separation of powers**. If a hostile majority dominated the legislature then the Constitution allowed it to paralyse the Directory. As the Directory was unable to dissolve the legislature or veto their laws, it came to rely on unconstitutional methods such as cancelling election returns and calling in the army to resolve any disputes.

Having drawn up the new constitution, the Convention, knowing that it was unpopular as an elected chamber, feared that free elections might produce a royalist majority. In order to avoid this it decreed that two-thirds of the deputies to the new Councils must be chosen from among the existing deputies of the Convention. The new constitution of Year III was agreed on 22 August 1795. This was then submitted to a **plebiscite** for approval – 1,057,390 were in favour of the Constitution, against 49,978 who opposed it. Four million voters did not vote. The Two-Thirds Decree was accepted by only 205,000 to 108,000.

Key question

How effective was the new system?

Checks and balances

Ensuring that the power given to the executive was balanced by the power granted to the legislature.

Separation of powers

The division of executive and legislative powers in order that the government could not make laws without the support of the legislature.

Plebiscite

A popular vote on a single issue.

Key question

Why did the Verona Declaration fail to appeal to the French people?

Verona Declaration

As the discussions about the proposed constitution were nearing a close, the royalists sought to promote their cause. Constitutional monarchists wanting a return to a limited monarchy similar to that in the 1791 Constitution felt they were gaining public support, as they appeared to offer a prospect of stability. They had hoped to put Louis XVI's son, a prisoner in the Temple (one of the prisons in Paris), on the throne as 'Louis XVII' but he died in June 1795. From northern Italy the Comte de Provence, Louis XVI's brother, immediately proclaimed himself Louis XVIII and on 24 June issued the **Verona Declaration**.

Key term

Verona Declaration

A reactionary statement issued by the new heir to the throne promising to reverse many of the gains made during the Revolution.

The Declaration, however, turned out to be a reactionary document, which made the task of restoring the monarchy more difficult. Louis promised to restore the 'ancient constitution' of France completely, which meant restoring the three orders and the *parlements*. He also promised to restore 'stolen properties', such as that taken from the Church and the *émigrés*. This antagonised all those who had bought *biens nationaux* and all who had benefited from the abolition of the tithe and seigneurial dues. Although not intended, the Verona Declaration turned out to be a great boost to those who favoured a Republic.

Key question

What was unusual about the Vendémiaire Uprising?

The Vendémiaire Uprising

The Verona Declaration failed to attract mass support for the royalist cause. Although work on the new constitution was proceeding well, news of the Two-Thirds Law came as a shock to many Parisians who had hoped that the Convention would soon be replaced. Its inability to deal with food shortages and inflation turned many ordinary people against the Convention, yet it now appeared that most of its deputies would be returned to the new assembly. Royalists in particular felt that the prospect of any restoration of the monarchy was unlikely given the known hostility of the Convention. Frustration and anger spilled over into rebellion.

Key date

The Vendémiaire Uprising: 5 October 1795

On 5 October 1795 (13 Vendémiaire), a large royalist crowd of 25,000 gathered to march on the Convention and seize power. They greatly outnumbered the 7800 government troops but the latter had cannon, under the command of General Bonaparte, whereas the rebels did not. The devastating artillery fire – Bonaparte's famous 'Whiff of grapeshot' – crushed the rebellion. As over 300 were killed or wounded in the fighting, this was one of the bloodiest of the revolutionary *journées*. It also marked another watershed – the people of Paris would not again attempt to intimidate an elected assembly until 1830.

The divisions among the royalists and the unpopularity of the Verona Declaration all make the rising of Vendémiaire appear rather mysterious. It is usually presented as a royalist rising brought about by the Two-Thirds Decree, which, it is said, prevented the royalists from obtaining a majority in the elections to the Councils. Yet, the largest groups of rebels were artisans and apprentices: a third of those arrested were manual workers. The rising was not simply against the Two-Thirds Decree but had



The defeat of the royalist uprising of Vendémiaire, 1795. The print shows the force used by the Directory to suppress the uprising. The artillery used by Bonaparte is clearly shown firing into the crowd.

economic origins too. Many people, including *rentiers* – small proprietors – and government employees, had been badly hit by inflation. These people, who were among the rebels, had supported the Thermidorians and defended the Convention in the risings of Germinal and Prairial.

The repression that followed was light. Only two people were executed, although steps were taken to prevent further risings. The Sectional Assemblies were abolished and the National Guard was put under the control of the new General of the Army of the Interior, Napoleon Bonaparte. For the second time in six months the army had saved the Thermidorian Republic.

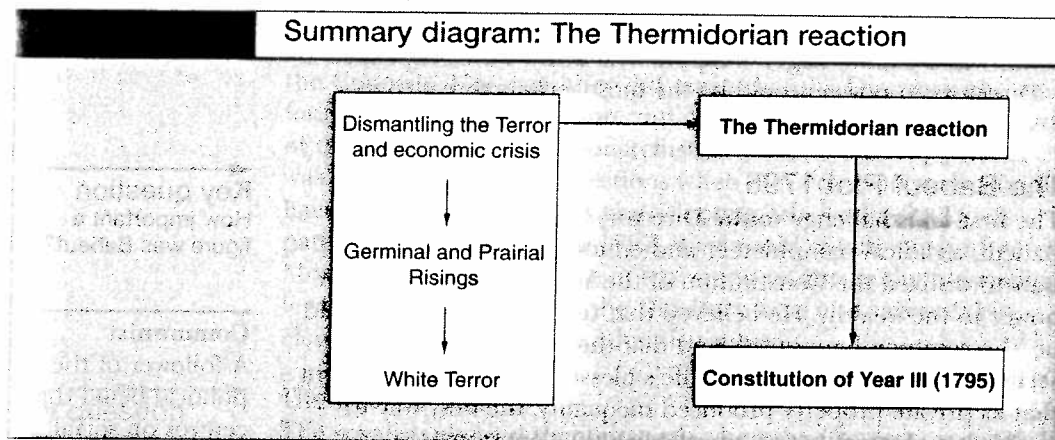
Profile: Napoleon Bonaparte 1769–1821

- 1769 – Born into a minor noble family on the island of Corsica which had only been part of France since 1768
- 1784 – Enters the *École Militaire* in Paris
- 1785 – Commissioned as an artillery officer
- 1793 – Commands artillery at siege of Toulon
- 1795 – Puts down Vendémiaire Uprising
- 1796 – Appointed commander of the army in Italy
- 1797 – Negotiates the Peace of Campo Formio
- 1798 – Sets off on the Egyptian campaign
- 1799 – *Coup* of Brumaire, appointed First Consul
- 1804 – Proclaimed Emperor of the French
- 1815 – Defeated at Waterloo and exiled to St Helena
- 1821 – Death and burial at St Helena
- 1840 – Remains reburied at *Les Invalides* in Paris



The emergence of Napoleon as one of the ablest and most popular generals during the Directory is one of the key features of the Revolution. His use by the Directory to resolve political disputes made him aware of how weak the system was. When invited to join the *coup* to overthrow the Directory he agreed willingly (see Chapter 8, pages 185–210).

Summary diagram: The Thermidorian reaction



Key question

What difficulties confronted the Directory when it took up office and how was it able to survive for so long?

Key term

Conventionnels
Members of the Convention between 1792 and 1795.

2 | The Directory

The new third of members elected to the Council of Five Hundred after Vendémiaire and the dissolution of the Convention was mainly royalist, but they were unable to influence the choice of directors. As the Verona Declaration had threatened to punish all regicides, the *conventionnels* elected Directors (Carnot was the best known) all of whom were regicides, as this would be a guarantee against a royalist restoration.

The Directors wanted to provide a stable and liberal government, which would maintain the gains of the Revolution. Yet the problems they faced were daunting. The war appeared to be endless, and it had to be paid for. The treasury was empty, taxes were unpaid and the *assignat* had plummeted in value. Many Frenchmen did not expect the Directory to last more than a few months.

The Directory did, however, survive and for longer than any of the other revolutionary regimes. There were a number of factors that contributed to this:

- The Directory was committed to restoring the rule of law.
- Many of their key opponents were discredited. Few wanted a return either to the Jacobin Terror of Year II or to the absolute monarchy of the *ancien régime*.
- While many ordinary people were prepared to accept a constitutional monarchy with limited powers, the royalists themselves were deeply divided – between extremists who supported the Verona Declaration and constitutional monarchists.
- Public apathy also helped the Directory to survive – after six years of revolution and three years of war, revolutionary enthusiasm had all but disappeared.
- Significantly, the army supported the Directory, as a royalist restoration would mean an end to the war. Army officers did not wish to be deprived of any opportunity provided by war for promotion or plunder. It was the army, above all, that enabled

the Directory to overcome all challenges to its authority, but this was a double-edged weapon. The army, which kept the Directory in power, would be the most serious threat to its survival, if it became dissatisfied.

The Babeuf Plot 1796

The first real challenge to the Directory came from Gracchus Babeuf, a radical pamphleteer and editor of *Tribun du Peuple*. Babeuf disliked the Constitution of the Year III, because it gave power to the wealthy. He believed that the aim of society should be 'the common happiness', and that the Revolution should secure the equal enjoyment of life's blessings for all. He thought that as private property produced inequality, the only way to establish real equality was 'to establish the communal management of property and abolish private possession'. These ideas were much more radical than those put forward in the Year II and have led many historians to regard Babeuf as the first **Communist**, a forerunner of Karl Marx (1818–83).

From March 1796 Babeuf organised a plan to overthrow the Directory by means of a *coup*. He saw what he called his **Conspiracy of Equals** as a popular rising. Babeuf realised, however, that this would not come about spontaneously but must be prepared by a small group of dedicated revolutionaries. Through propaganda and agitation they would persuade key institutions, like the army and police, who would provide the armed force to seize power. After seizing power, the revolutionary leaders would not hand it over to an elected assembly but would establish a dictatorship, in order to make fundamental changes in the organisation of society.

Babeuf received no support from the *sans-culottes* and little from former Jacobins. He was arrested in May 1796, after being betrayed to the authorities by a fellow conspirator, and was executed the following year. Marxist historians such as Albert Soboul consider Babeuf's theories to be extremely influential. They argue that his ideas inspired not only nineteenth-century French revolutionaries, like Blanqui, but, ultimately Lenin and his followers who set up the first communist state in the Soviet Union in 1917. Babeuf's importance to the French Revolution itself however was slight.

The Coup d'état of Fructidor 1797

The elections of 1797 revealed a growing popular shift towards the monarchists. People were tired of war abroad and religious conflict at home and found the idea of a constitutional monarchy attractive, believing that it would offer peace and stability. Of the 216 ex-members of the Convention who sought re-election, only 11 were returned. Monarchists won 180 of the 260 seats being contested, bringing their numbers in the Councils to 330. The wealthy, populous northern departments returned the largest proportion of monarchists, which suggests that the Directory had lost the support of the richer bourgeoisie.

Key question
How important a figure was Babeuf?

Communist

A follower of the political belief that centres on social and economic equality as outlined by Karl Marx.

Conspiracy of Equals

Babeuf's theory of how to organise a revolution – using a small group of committed revolutionaries rather than a mass movement.

Key terms

Key question
What threat did the revival of monarchism pose to the Directory?

The elections, in which in some departments fewer than 10 per cent of electors voted, did not give the monarchists a majority in the Councils. However, they did mean that the Directory no longer had majority support and could rely on only about a third of the deputies. All the monarchists needed to do, it appeared, was to wait for the next elections when more *conventionnels* would have to give up their seats and, if voting followed a similar pattern to the elections of 1797, they would obtain a majority. Monarchists would then be in a position to restore the monarchy legally. The opponents of the Directory were also successful in elections to the provincial administrations.

Key question
What was the importance of the Coup of Fructidor?

Key date
Republican directors purge pro-monarchist deputies and directors in the Coup of Fructidor: 3–4 September 1797

The *coup d'état*

The royalists showed their strength when the Councils appointed three of their supporters to important positions. One was elected President of the Five Hundred and another President of the Ancients. Barthélemy, the new director, was regarded as sympathetic to the monarchists, as was Carnot, who was becoming steadily more conservative. Carnot was prepared to give up conquered territory to make a lasting peace and so was disliked by the generals.

Of the remaining Directors, two were committed republicans. They were determined to prevent a restoration of the monarchy and sought help from the army. Bonaparte had already sent General Augereau to Paris with some troops to support the republican Directors. On the night of 3–4 September 1797 (17–18 Fructidor, Year V) troops were ordered to seize all the strong points in Paris and surround the Council chambers. They then arrested two Directors, Carnot and Barthélemy, and 53 deputies.

Some of the remaining deputies who attended the Councils clearly felt intimidated, and they approved two decrees demanded by the remaining Directors. One decree cancelled the elections in 49 Departments, removing 177 deputies without providing for their replacement. Normandy, Brittany, the Paris area and the north now had no parliamentary representation at all. A second decree provided for the deportation to the penal settlements in Guiana of Carnot (who had escaped and fled abroad and was sentenced in absentia), Barthélemy, the 53 deputies arrested, and some leading royalists. The Directors also cancelled the local government elections and made appointments themselves.

It was clear to all that the *coup* was the end of parliamentary government and of the Constitution of the Year III, and that the executive had won an important victory over the legislature. The revival of monarchism had been dealt a significant blow. It also meant that the Directory could now govern without facing hostile Councils.

Terror

After Fructidor, the new Directory took action against *émigrés* and refractory priests. *Émigrés* who had returned to France were given

two weeks to leave: otherwise they would be executed. During the next few months many were hunted down and were sentenced to death. Clergy were now required to take an oath rejecting any support for royalty: those refusing would be deported to Guiana. The 1400 non-juring priests were sentenced to deportation.

The terror that followed Fructidor was limited. It was carried out solely by the government and the army in an attempt to destroy the royalist movement. In the short term it succeeded but, by alienating Catholic opinion, it provided more opponents for the Directory.

Financial reform

Many of the financial problems of the Directory were the legacy of previous regimes, which had printed more and more *assignats* in order to pay for the war. As by February 1796, these were almost worthless, the Directory issued a new paper currency, known as *mandats territoriaux*. They also soon lost value, and by July were worth less than five per cent of their nominal value. In February 1797 they ceased to be legal tender.

The monetary crisis had been catastrophic for government officials, *rentiers* and workers, as they saw a rapid decline in their purchasing power. Metal coins now became the only legal currency and these were in short supply: there were only one billion *livres* in circulation in 1797, compared with two and a half billion in 1789. This resulted in **deflation**, as producers and retailers lowered prices to try and stimulate demand among consumers who were reluctant to buy goods. The inflation of 1795–7 had made the Directory unpopular with the workers. Now it became unpopular with businessmen since lower prices meant lower profits.

Decreasing the national debt

From the *Coup* of Fructidor to the spring of 1799 the Directory had little trouble with the purged Councils, and Dominique-Vincent Ramel, the Minister of Finance, had an opportunity to introduce some far-reaching reforms. In September 1797 two-thirds of the **national debt** was renounced by a one-off payment to debt holders. Their loans to the government were converted into non-interest-bearing bonds, which could be used to buy national property.

This move was of immediate benefit to the government, as it reduced the annual interest on the national debt from 240 million francs (which was about a quarter of government expenditure) to 80 million. It was not of much use to the bondholders who were denied income. Within a year the value of the bonds had fallen by 60 per cent; soon after that they became worthless, when the government refused to accept them for the purchase of *biens*. This was, in effect, a partial declaration of state bankruptcy, as two-thirds of the national debt was liquidated in this way. Although debt holders were unhappy with the measure, the **'bankruptcy of the two-thirds'**, as it was known, helped to stabilise French finances for a time.

Key question

What was the impact of the financial crisis facing the Directory?

Mandats territoriaux

The new paper currency issued by the Directory in March 1796 and withdrawn in February 1797, when worth only one per cent of face value.

Deflation

A fall in prices as demand for goods and services falls.

National debt

Money borrowed by the government from its own people, on which it has to pay interest. This debt increased during the Revolution and the war.

'Bankruptcy of the two-thirds'

The government wrote off two-thirds of the debt it owed its creditors.

Increasing revenue

In addition to cutting expenditure Ramel wanted to increase revenue. He put in place a number of policies to achieve this:

- In 1798 four basic forms of direct taxation were established:
 - a tax on trading licences
 - a land tax
 - a tax on movable property
 - a tax on doors and windows.

These measures were among the most lasting achievements of the Directory and survived until 1914.

- Ramel changed the method of collecting direct taxes. Whereas, previously, locally elected authorities had been responsible for collection, central control was now introduced. Commissioners appointed by the Directors were to assess and levy taxes.
- As there was a continual deficit during wartime, the government revived an unpopular practice of the *ancien régime* – indirect taxes. The *octrois* (page 5) was re-introduced and was again very unpopular, as it raised the price of goods in the towns.
- An increasingly lucrative source of income was plunder from those foreign states, especially Italy and Germany, which had been occupied by French armies.

Key term

Balance the budget

To create a situation in which the government's expenditure is equal to its income.

The impact of these policies was positive. Although very unpopular, the 'bankruptcy of the two-thirds' helped to stabilise French finances for a time. Aided by the reduced military expenditure when peace with Austria was made in October 1797, and new taxes, Ramel was able to **balance the budget** for the first time since the Revolution began.

Key question

To what extent had French forces reversed earlier defeats by the end of 1795?

War: 1794–9

The battle of Fleurus (in Belgium) in June 1794 was the first of a series of successes, which continued until all the members of the First Coalition, except Britain, had been knocked out of the war. In the summer of 1794, Belgium was occupied and, in the following winter, the United Provinces were invaded. The French conquered the Rhineland and crossed into Spain. Russia had intervened in Poland, which it was clear would be partitioned again. Prussia therefore made peace with France so that she would be free to claim Polish territory for herself. This, in reality, made very little difference as Prussia had played only a minimal part in the war against France since 1793.

At the Treaty of Basle on 6 April 1795, Prussia promised to hand over its territories on the left bank of the Rhine to France. In return she would receive land on the right bank. This treaty freed French troops to attack other enemies.

Meanwhile, the United Provinces had become the Batavian Republic in January 1795, after a revolt against William V, who

fled to England. Having lost Prussian support, the Dutch hastily made peace with France, who they were forced to join as an ally. The French hoped that the powerful Dutch navy would help to tip the naval balance against Great Britain. Spain too made peace in July, giving up to France her part of the island of San Domingo. Of the Great Powers, only Great Britain and Austria remained in the fight against France.

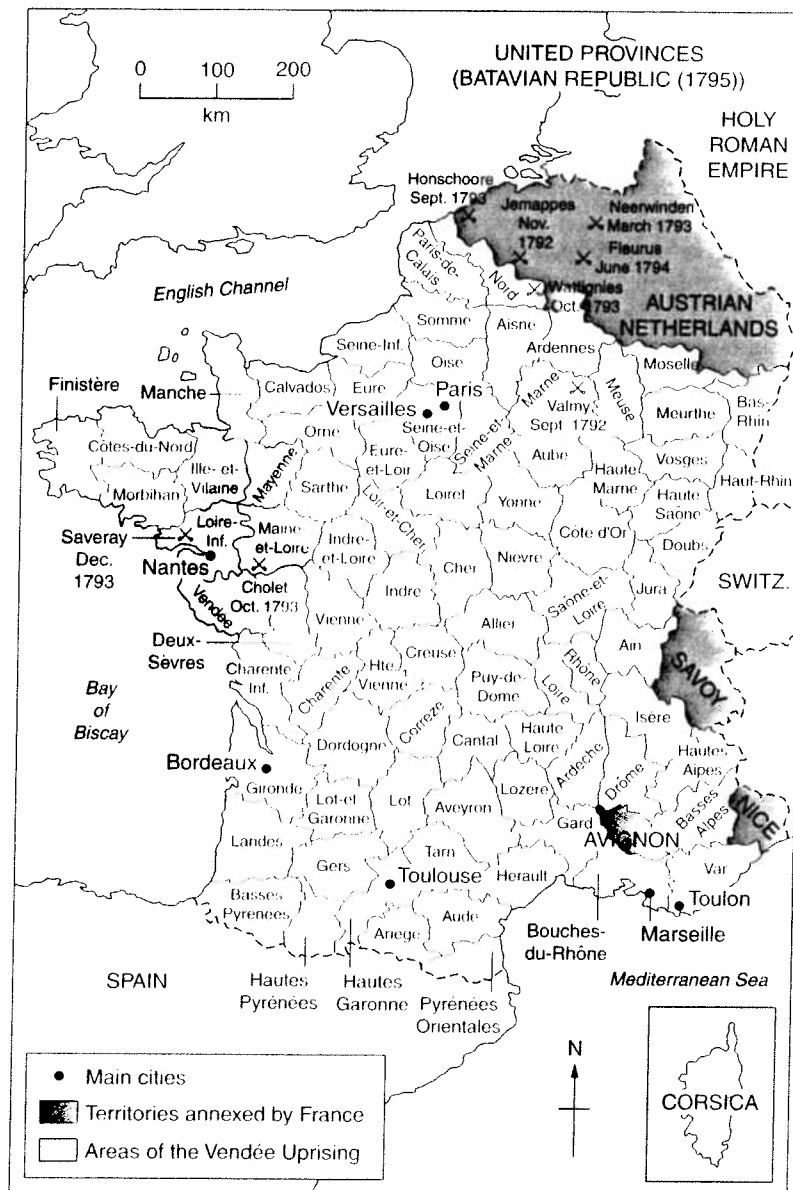


Figure 6.1: France, 1789–95. Note how France had extended her territory particularly in the north east in order to establish a natural frontier on the Rhine.

Key question
What impact did Napoleon make on the war in Italy?

Key dates
General Napoleon Bonaparte appointed commander of the French army in Italy: 2 March 1796

Peace of Campo Formio ends the war between Austria and France: 18 October 1797

Defeat of Austria

In 1796 the main French objective was to defeat Austria. Carnot drew up the plan of campaign and prepared a pincer movement against Austria. Armies under Jourdan and Moreau would march across Bavaria to Vienna, whilst the armies of the Alps and Italy would conquer Piedmont and Lombardy and then move across the Alps to Vienna. The main attack was to be by Jourdan and Moreau, who were given 140,000 troops.

Command of the Italian campaign was given to the 27-year-old General Napoleon Bonaparte on 2 March 1796. It was expected that he would play a secondary role as he had no field experience and only 30,000 unpaid and ill-disciplined troops under his command. Yet Napoleon was to turn Italy into the major battleground against Austria. He was able to do this by winning the loyalty of his men, to whom he promised vast wealth.

Within a month of taking command he had defeated the north Italian state of Piedmont and forced her to make peace. In the same month of May he defeated the Austrians at Lodi and entered Milan. Mantua was the key to the passes over the Alps to Vienna, and Napoleon finally captured it in February 1797. The road to Vienna seemed open but all had not been going well for the French. The Archduke Charles had driven Moreau back to the Rhine, so Napoleon signed an **armistice** with Austria at Leoben in April.

Napoleon decided the terms at Leoben, without consulting the Directory. He was already confident enough to be making his own foreign policy and, in so doing, ignoring specific instructions from the Directors. They had wanted to use Lombardy as a bargaining counter when negotiating with Austria to exchange for recognition of French control of the left bank of the Rhine. Instead, Napoleon joined Lombardy to Modena and the Papal Legations to form the Cisalpine Republic. Austria recognised Belgium, which the French had annexed in October 1795, as French territory.

As compensation for giving up Lombardy and Belgium, Napoleon gave Austria Venice and part of the Venetian Republic, which provided access to the Adriatic. The fate of the left bank of the Rhine was unclear: it was to be decided by a Congress of the Holy Roman Empire. The Directory and the generals on the Rhine were furious that they had no choice but to accept what Napoleon had done. As the royalists had won the elections in France, the Directory knew it might need him. The peace of Campo Formio 18 October 1797 confirmed what had been agreed at Leoben.

Key terms
Armistice
An agreement between two countries to end hostilities. This would precede a peace settlement that would formally mark the end of a war.

Irish Nationalists
Irish who were staunchly anti-British and wished to be free from what they considered foreign rule. During the Revolution they approached the republicans for support.

Key question
Why was France unable to take advantage of Britain's isolation?

Britain isolated

With her major allies out of the war, Britain was now isolated. The French wanted to invade Britain, but for this to happen control of the seas was necessary in order to ensure safe passage for an invasion army. In particular they wanted to support **Irish Nationalists** in their attempt to overthrow British rule in Ireland. Control of the sea was also vital if the French hoped to send a

military expedition to Ireland. The French hoped that with the aid of the Dutch and Spanish fleets (Spain had become an ally of France in October 1796) they would be able to obtain this. These plans were dashed by two British victories in 1797. In February the Spanish fleet was defeated off Cape St Vincent and the Dutch fleet was almost completely destroyed at Camperdown in October. The war with Britain therefore continued.

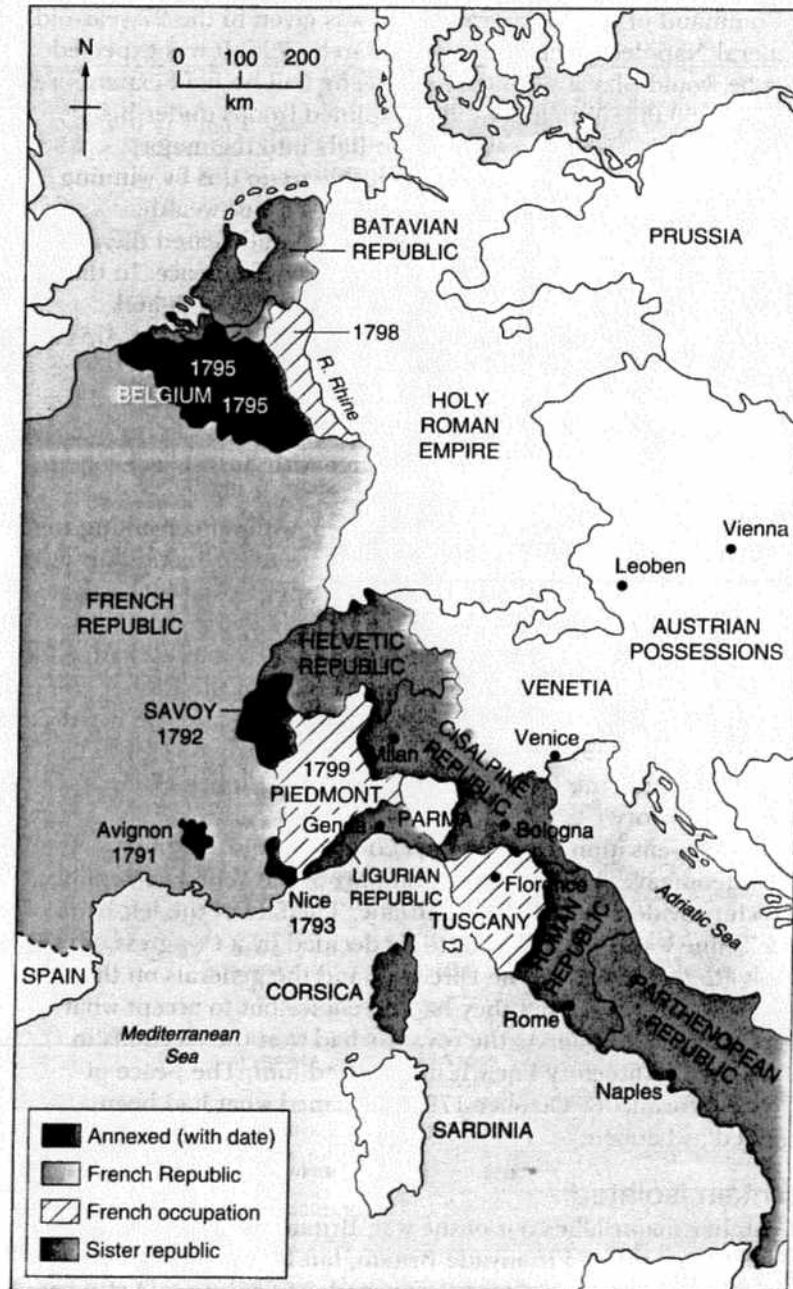


Figure 6.2: The expansion of revolutionary France. Note how the French Republic established 'sister republics' along some of her borders. Why do you think the republicans did this?

Key question

How was the creation of new states beneficial to the Republic?

Key terms

Satellite republics

States that had the appearance of being independent but were in reality under French control.

Second Coalition

Formed in 1799 and consisting of Britain, Russia, Austria, Turkey, Portugal and Naples.

Creating states

On the continent the prospects for a permanent peace receded. French foreign policy became increasingly aggressive as the Directors sought to keep French conquests and even extend them. France reorganised a number of foreign territories, effectively redrawing the map of Europe in some areas. These new territories were in effect **satellite republics** under French influence or control:

- The Helvetic Republic was set up in Switzerland in January 1798 with the help of Swiss Patriots sympathetic to French ideals. This was important to France, as it controlled the main Alpine passes to Italy. Geneva was annexed to France.
- In Italy three small republics were created:
 1. The Roman Republic after the French invasion and the flight of the Pope to Tuscany (1798).
 2. The Cisalpine Republic based on Milan.
 3. The Ligurian Republic, which replaced the Genoese Republic in June 1797.
- The Batavian Republic was established in the United Provinces in January 1795, after a revolt supported by the French against William V, who fled to England.
- The French were busy redrawing the map of Germany in negotiations with the Congress of the Holy Roman Empire at Rastatt. In March 1798 the Congress handed over the left bank of the Rhine to France and agreed that princes who had lost land there should be compensated by receiving Church land elsewhere in Germany.

The spring of 1798 marked the high point of the Republic's power. In western, central and southern Europe, France had attained a degree of hegemony (domination) unparalleled in modern European history (see the map opposite). Yet from this position of great external strength, the decline in the Directory's fortunes was equally dramatic. Within 18 months it would be overthrown.

Key question

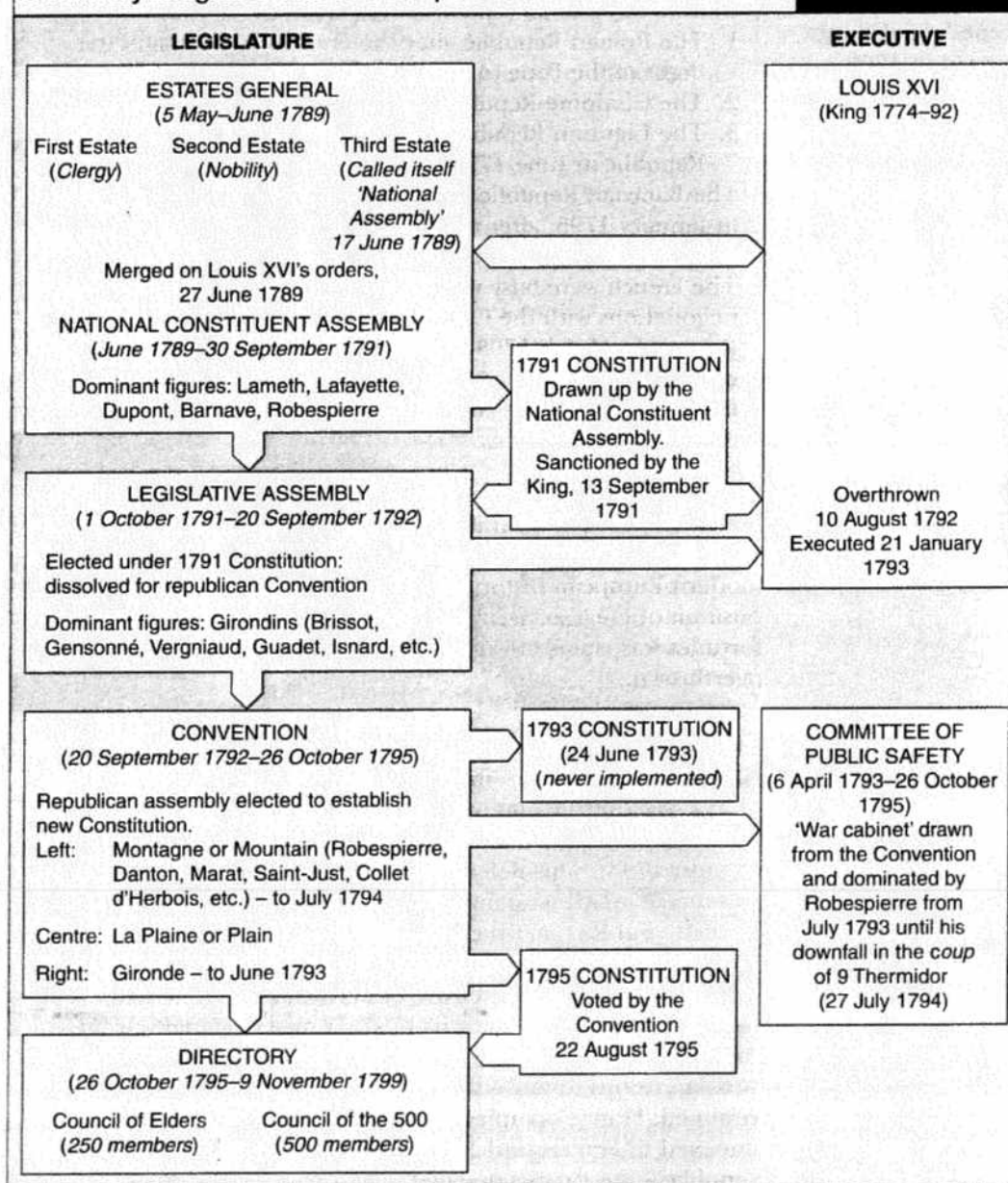
What impact did the defeat of the French at Aboukir Bay have on the war?

The Second Coalition

Following his successes in Italy, Napoleon departed for Egypt in May 1798 with the aim of attacking British interests. His fleet, however, was destroyed by Nelson at the Battle of Aboukir Bay (August 1798). This defeat encouraged other countries to once again take up arms against France. A **Second Coalition** was formed, and Russia, which had not taken part in previous fighting against France, declared war in December. Tsar Paul was incensed at the French seizure of Malta, of which he had declared himself protector in 1797. France declared war on Austria in March 1799 on the grounds that Austria had allowed Russian troops to move through her territory. Immediately war resumed, France occupied the rest of Italy; Piedmont was annexed to France, and Naples was turned into another 'sister' republic – the Parthenopean.

These early successes were followed by a series of defeats. The French were pushed back to the Rhine by the Austrians, and the Russians advanced through northern Italy. French forces withdrew from the whole of Italy, except Genoa, as the Russians moved into Switzerland. It appeared that France would be invaded for the first time in six years, but, as had happened before, France was saved by quarrels among the allies. Austria, instead of supporting Russia in Switzerland, sent her best troops north to the Rhine. This allowed the French to move on to the offensive in Switzerland, where the Russians withdrew in the autumn of 1799. The immediate danger to France was over.

Summary diagram: The French political structure 1789–95



Key question
How effective were the measures introduced in 1799 to deal with the worsening economic and military crisis?

Key date
Law of 22 Floréal – also known as the *Coup d'état* of Floréal, when the Directory excluded Jacobin deputies from the Council: 11 May 1798

3 | The *Coup* of Brumaire and the Overthrow of the Directory

The persecution of royalists after Fructidor had been severe, so they tended to keep away from the electoral assemblies in the 1798 election. Although the Jacobins did well in the elections, they captured less than a third of the seats. The Directory could be sure of a majority of support among deputies in the new legislature, yet the Directors persuaded the Councils by the Law of 22 Floréal (11 May 1798) to annul the election of 127 deputies, 86 of whom were suspected Jacobins. In another contravention of the 1795 Constitution, the Directors chose most of the deputies who replaced the expelled members. The *Coup d'état* of Floréal was less drastic than that of Fructidor but it had less justification: no-one could pretend that the Republic was in danger. Once again the Directory had shown its contempt for the wishes of the electors.

Jourdan's Law

By 1798 there were concerns about the size of the French army, which was only 270,000 strong. Desertion, low morale and a reluctance to join the military were all taking their toll. Jourdan's law proposed that conscription be re-introduced for the first time since 1793. The Councils approved this in September 1798. However, it provoked widespread resistance. Much of Belgium, where conscription was also introduced, revolted in November and it took two months to put down the rising. The prospect of conscription was viewed with great reluctance among large numbers of young men who went to great lengths to avoid military service. Of the first draft of 230,000, only 74,000 reached the armies.

The 1799 elections once again showed the unpopularity of the Directory. Only 66 of 187 government candidates were elected. Among the rest there were about 50 Jacobins, including some who had been purged during Floréal. They were still a minority but many moderate deputies were now prepared to follow their lead. The moderates had become disillusioned with the government, as news of military defeats reached Paris. The military situation was regarded as so desperate that the Councils were persuaded to pass emergency laws that were proposed by Jacobins. In June 1799 Jourdan called for a new *levée en masse*: all men between 20 and 25 were to be called up immediately.

Crisis

With her armies being forced back into France, the Republic could no longer pay for the war by seizing foreign assets. A **forced loan** on the rich was therefore decreed. This was intended to raise 100 million *livres*, a sum that meant that the wealthy might have to give up as much as three-quarters of their income. The **Law of Hostages** of 12 July was even worse for the notables. Any areas resisting the new laws could be declared 'disturbed'. Local authorities could then arrest relatives of *émigrés*, nobles or

Key terms
Forced loan
A measure compelling the wealthy to loan money to the government.
Law of Hostages
Laid down that the relatives of any French citizens challenging the authority of the Republic would be imprisoned at their own expense and their property seized to pay for damage done by anti-government rebels.

rebels. They could be imprisoned, fined and their property confiscated to pay for the damage done by those causing disturbances.

These measures appeared to be a return to the arbitrary arrests and harassment of the Terror of the Year II. Yet by November only 10 million *livres* of the forced loan had been collected. Conscription was planned to raise 402,000 troops but, as in 1798, there was widespread resistance and only 248,000 actually joined the army. Many became brigands or royalist rebels to avoid being called up. The Law of Hostages was hardly ever applied, because of opposition from local officials.

In 1799 there was a virtual collapse of government administration in the provinces. There were many reasons for this:

- the Directory could not persuade local notables to accept office and had few troops to enforce its decrees
- local authorities were often taken over by royalists, who refused to levy forced loans, persecute non-juring priests or catch deserters
- the National Guard was not large enough to keep order in the absence of regular troops, so substantial areas of the countryside were not policed at all
- government commissioners were killed as quickly as they were replaced.

The result of this administrative collapse was **brigandage**. By November 1799 there was civil war in the Ardèche region in southern France.

Brigandage

Outbreaks of lawlessness and violence by groups of bandits.

Key term

The *Coup d'état* of Brumaire

In the late summer of 1799 the military situation improved. The Russians were driven out of Switzerland in September. Sieyès (page 29), who had become a Director, saw this as an opportunity to stage a *coup*. He wanted to strengthen the executive but knew that the Five Hundred would not agree to this and that it could not be done constitutionally. Therefore a *coup* was required for which the support of the army would be necessary. But which general could be relied on?

Moreau was approached but recommended Bonaparte, who had returned from Egypt on 10 October. 'There is your man', he told Sieyès. 'He will make your *coup d'état* far better than I can.' On his way to Paris Bonaparte was greeted enthusiastically by the population, as the most successful of the republican generals and the one who had brought peace in 1797. He had made up his mind to play a leading role in French politics. He agreed to join Sieyès' *coup* but only on condition that a provisional government of three consuls, who would draft a new constitution, should be set up (page 186).

Key question

What was Sieyès hoping to achieve by a *coup*?

Key term

Saint-Cloud

A former royal palace in the suburbs of Paris away from the influence of the Parisian populace, where the plotters believed that Jacobinism was still a powerful force.

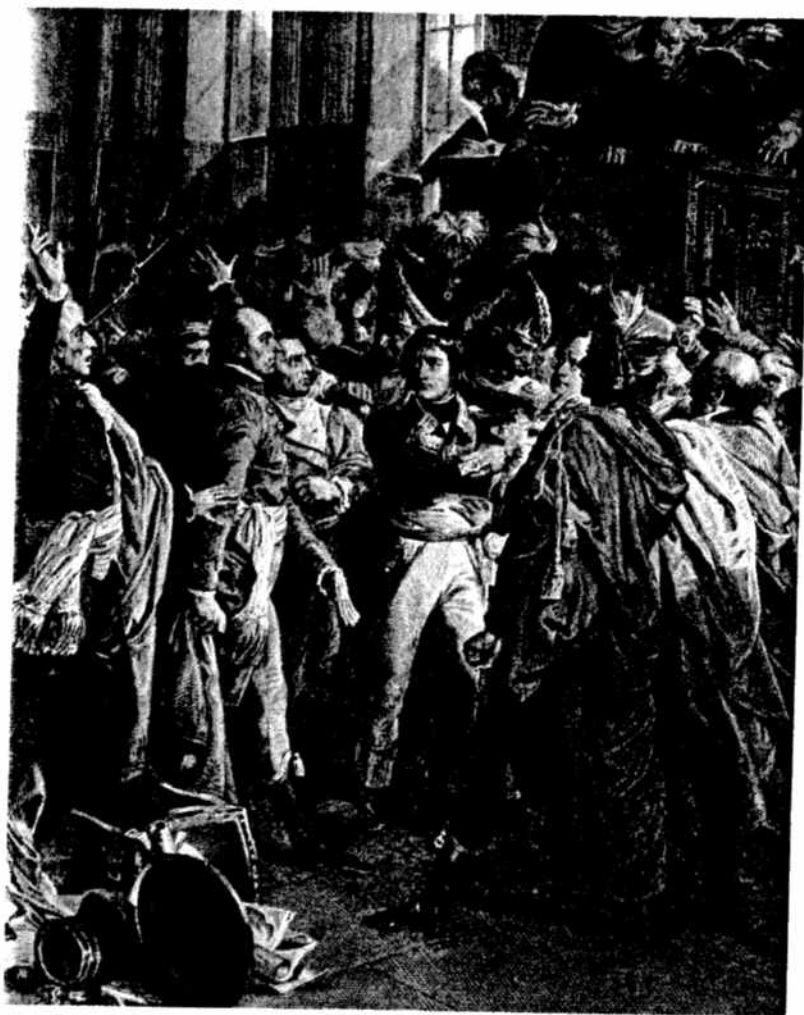
The removal to Saint-Cloud

Sieyès wanted to move the Councils to **Saint-Cloud**, as the Jacobins in the Five Hundred in Paris were numerous enough to provide opposition to his plans. The Ancients, using as an excuse the fear of a plot, persuaded the Councils to move to a safer location at Saint-Cloud. Once there it became clear on 19 Brumaire (10 November) that the only plot was one organised by Sieyès. The Council of Five Hundred was furious, so Bonaparte reluctantly agreed to address both Councils.

The appearance of Napoleon in the Five Hundred with armed grenadiers was greeted with cries of 'Outlaw' and 'Down with the tyrant'. He was physically attacked by Jacobin deputies and had to be rescued by fellow officers. It was not at all clear that the soldiers would take action against the elected representatives of the nation. Napoleon's brother Lucien, President of the Five Hundred, came to his rescue when he told the troops that some deputies were trying to assassinate their general. At this the troops cleared the hall where the Five Hundred were meeting.

Some hours later a small group of Councillors sympathetic to the plotters met and approved a decree abolishing the Directory.

Napoleon and the Council of Five Hundred at Saint-Cloud by Bouchot. The artist seeks to portray Napoleon in a heroic pose as an isolated figure surrounded by hostile opponents but determined to do what is right for France.



Key term

It was replaced with a provisional executive committee of three members, Sieyès, Roger Ducos and Napoleon. The great beneficiary of Brumaire was Napoleon but it was his brother who was the true hero of the hour.

Constitution of Year VIII

Napoleon issued a Proclamation to the French Nation on 10 November 1799 to explain why he had taken part in the *coup*: 'On my return to Paris I found all authority in chaos and agreement only on the one truth that the constitution was half destroyed and incapable of preserving liberty. Men of every party came to see me, confided their plans, disclosed their secrets and asked for my support. I refused to be a **man of party**'.

Paris remained calm, but this was a sign of apathy and reluctance to become involved in any more protest, rather than of approval. When news of the *coup* spread to the provinces there was little rejoicing at the events. Such reaction as there was varied between surprise and mild opposition. A poster that appeared in Paris expressed the disillusionment many felt towards the Directory: 'France wants something great and long-lasting. Instability has been her downfall. She has no desire for a monarchy, wants a free and independent legislature and to enjoy the benefits from ten years of sacrifices'.

Key question

What significance did Napoleon attach to the new Constitution?

Man of party

A phrase used by Napoleon to indicate he was not tied to any particular group, such as the monarchists or Jacobins, and that he was acting in the best interests of France.

Key term



A contemporary print that depicts France as a woman being dragged into an abyss by two figures representing revolutionary fanaticism. Napoleon is attempting to draw her back towards justice, unity, peace and plenty. According to this print what is Napoleon's role in the history of the Revolution?

When Napoleon presented the new Constitution of year VIII to the French people on 15 December 1799, he said that it was 'founded on the true principles of representative government, on the sacred rights of property, equality and liberty [pages 186–7]. Citizens the Revolution is established on the principles which began it. It is finished.' Many did not realise the significance of the *coup d'état* of Brumaire. The republican phase of the Revolution was drawing to a close, while another, destined to culminate in the Napoleonic Empire, was beginning (Chapter 8).

Key question

Why did the Directory fail?

The failure of the Directory

The Directors had wanted to produce a stable government, which maintained the gains of the Revolution of 1789 whilst avoiding the extremes of Jacobin dictatorship or royalism. In the final analysis they were unsuccessful, and this was due to a combination of factors:

- Their failure to create stability was partly due to the Constitution of the Year III, with its annual elections and no provision for settling disputes between the executive and the legislature or change the Constitution in a reasonable way.
- In order to try and maintain a non-Jacobin/Royalist majority in the Councils, the Directors interfered with the election results. During the *coups*, Fructidor 1797 and Floréal 1798, they purged the Councils. The effect of such action on the Constitution, as Napoleon told the Ancients, was that: 'Nobody has any respect for it now'.
- Increasing reliance on the army to settle political disputes. This started with the Thermidorians during the risings of Prairial and Vendémiaire and continued under the Directory with the *coup d'état* of Fructidor. This reliance made an army takeover a distinct possibility. Although a politician planned the *Coup* of Brumaire, and assumed the army would merely occupy a supporting role, its most important figure was General Napoleon Bonaparte, who had no intention of leaving the political stage.
- Most of the people who would normally have supported the Directory – owners of *biens*, the wealthy notables – were alienated by its policies, especially its forced loans. They showed this by refusing, in increasingly large numbers, to vote in the annual elections or to take up posts in local government. When the challenge to the Directory came, few were prepared to defend it.
- Any enthusiasm for the war had long since gone and most people wanted peace. Yet war had become a necessity for the Directory – to ensure money for the French treasury, to produce the victories and the prestige that would enable the regime to survive, and to provide an opportunity to keep ambitious generals and unruly soldiers out of France. As Napoleon observed '... to exist it [the Directory] needed a state of war as other governments need a state of peace'. One of the reasons for Napoleon's popularity was that he had brought peace at Campo Formio in 1797.

- The renewal of the war after 1797 also produced a flurry of Jacobin activity. The Jacobins pressed for and secured a forced loan and the Law of Hostages. While Jacobins by the late 1790s were never more than an urban minority, the policies they advocated revived fears of a Terror like that of Year II, and helped convince many that the Directory could not, and should not, survive.

These events discredited the Directory and produced politicians who were not as attached to the Republic as the *conventionnels* had been. Only 12 per cent of those elected to the Councils in 1799 had been members of the Convention and only five per cent were regicides. Over half the deputies chosen in 1799 were elected for the first time that year. These deputies were prepared to accept the view of Sieyès that the Constitution should be changed and that this involved getting rid of the Directory. They were not only prepared to welcome the new regime but took part in running it. Of 498 important officials of the **Consulate** 77 per cent had been deputies under the Directory. These conservative and moderates wanted stability and were prepared to accept an authoritarian regime to get it. To some extent the regime collapsed because of the contradictions within it – it claimed to favour democracy yet used the military to suppress opposition: it needed war for economic purposes, yet the war lost it considerable domestic support.

Achievements of the Directory

Despite the fact that the Directory was the longest lasting of the revolutionary regimes there has been a tendency to dismiss it as a period of little achievement. The trend in recent years has been to consider the period in a more balanced and objective way. Many of the achievements of the Consulate began under the Directory. The financial reforms and reorganisation of the tax system started during the Directory contributed to economic recovery (pages 148–9). These helped stimulate industrial and agricultural expansion that would develop much more fully in the Napoleonic era. Changes in administration within the departments preceded the roles later taken by **prefects**. Although its collapse was sudden, the Directory's achievements should not be dismissed as insignificant.

Consulate

The system of government that replaced the Directory. It took its name from the three Consuls of whom Napoleon was the most important as first Consul. They formed the executive in the new constitution of 1799.

Prefect

Centrally appointed government official whose task was to administer a department and ensure government policy was carried out.

Key question

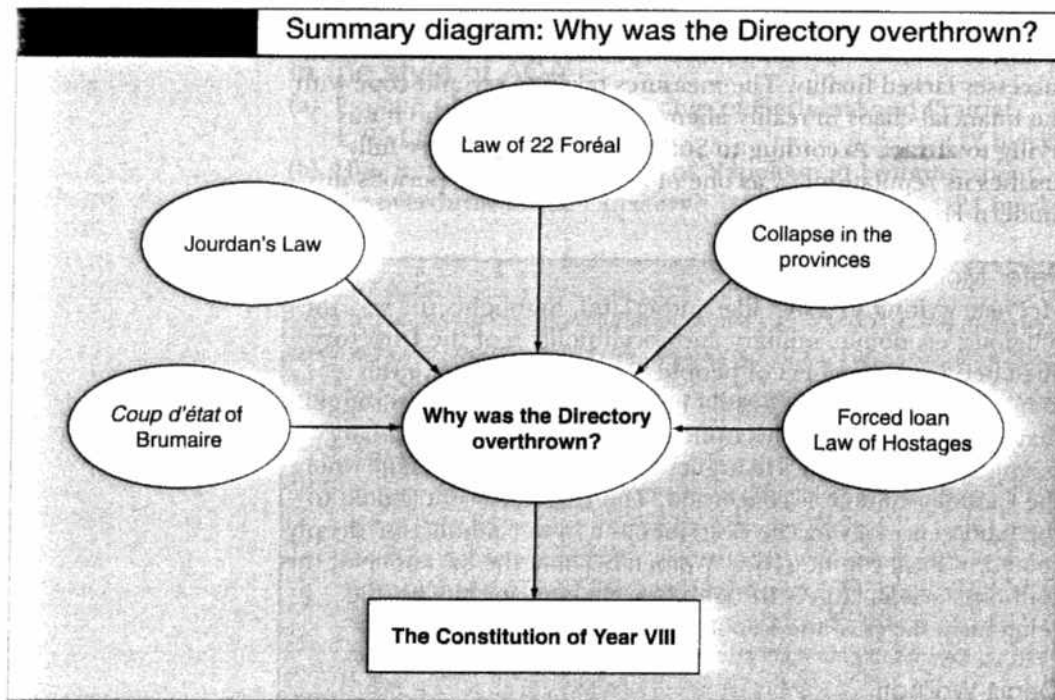
Did the Directory have any achievements?

4 | The Key Debate

It is possible to dismiss the period of Thermidor and the Directory as being of little importance in the history of the French Revolution. It is considered to have lacked the idealism and spirit that drove the great reforms that re-shaped the nation. A central issue that concerns historians is:

Did the Thermidorians and the Directory make any real contribution to the Revolution?

Summary diagram: Why was the Directory overthrown?



Peter Taaffe

Peter Taaffe (1989), as a Marxist writer, focuses on how the Thermidorians and the Directory sought to restore the controlling influence of the bourgeoisie over the Revolution, which had been lost during the Terror to the *sans-culottes*. It was during this period, Taaffe argues, that the bourgeoisie 'garnered [collected] the fruits of the Revolution'. The contribution of what he considers to be a corrupt regime was essentially a negative one: the suppression of the Conspiracy of Equals and the Vendémiaire uprising helped pave the way for a military dictatorship under Napoleon.

William Doyle

Doyle, Professor of History at the University of Bristol, writing in 1989, stresses the enormous economic problems that confronted the Thermidorians and the Directory. Alongside this was their need to maintain a balance between the far left and the far right. While noting that the dramatic solution to the economic crisis did restore the nation's finances, he emphasises the mistakes made in foreign affairs. As far as contributing to the Revolution the 'arrogance' of the regime undermined any real achievements within their grasp. Officials and soldiers during the Directory considered themselves superior to all others and entitled 'to behave according to their own rules'.

D.M.G. Sutherland

In Professor Sutherland's view (1985) the Directory did have a number of undoubted successes. These were the repression of the

Vendeans and Chouans and the Treaty of Campo Formio, which contributed to the survival of the Republic. Yet he believed these successes lacked finality. The measures taken to try and cope with the financial chaos in reality alienated the notables who it was trying to attract. According to Sutherland, the Directory fully justifies its reputation '... as one of the most chaotic periods in modern French history'.

Peter McPhee

McPhee, writing in 2002, like Sutherland, highlights the way the religious, economic, military and social policies of the Directory alienated large numbers of people. Popular response to this 'bourgeois republic' was hostile in tone. Yet McPhee does suggest that in the midst of all this upheaval the resilience of ordinary people shone through. He argues that this is clearly visible where the Catholic Church is concerned. The Directory contributed to the emergence of what he describes as a 'new Catholicism' deeply rooted in local communities. Women become the backbone of this Catholic revival, largely through bravely ignoring the hostile religious policies of the Republic.

Denis Wornoff

Wornoff (1972) believes that the achievements of the Directory were not insignificant. In spite of the political failings of its final years it was able to preserve the bourgeois revolution. He argues that it took up once again the aims of the Constituent Assembly in wanting to complete the process of reconstructing France. That they failed was due to a combination of circumstances and their own weaknesses.

Some key books in the debate

- William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 1989).
 Martin Lyons, *France Under the Directory* (Cambridge University Press, 1975).
 Peter McPhee, *The French Revolution 1789–1799* (Oxford University Press, 2002).
 D.M.G. Sutherland, *France 1789–1815 Revolution and Counter-revolution* (Fontana, 1985).
 Peter Taaffe, *The Masses Arise: The Great French Revolution 1789–1815* (Fortress Books, 1989).
 Denis Wornoff, *The Thermidorian Regime and the Directory 1794–1799* (Cambridge University Press, 1984).
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